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THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE SCHOOLS.

Probably the chief purpose of the National Conference in putting passages from the Old Testament among the books for reading was to save future generations from the blank ignorance of the present generation of the book which, more than any other book, has woven itself into the texture of English literature, and of the English language. The other books on the list are fairly sown with allusions and quotations from the Bible, many of them from the Old Testament; and they are allusions of the sort which should be recognised from familiarity with their source, and not ground out from annotated texts. The New Testament is inextricably attached to vital questions of religion, and therefore must be left out of schools where pupils may profess all the varieties of religion of the continent of Europe, and of some perhaps of Asia; but Adam and Eve and Noah, Deborah and Jephthah and Samson, Saul and David and Solomon, raise no disputes of doctrine; and the worship of Baal has been dead so long that children can read the warfare of Elijah against his prophets without asking inconvenient questions. And all men agree, generally without thinking, that these stories set the high water mark in English for narrative which is both terse and vivid, flowing and stately, simple and elevated.

Furthermore, some of us nourish the hope that this reading may do something to create standards of taste in literature, and establish the beginnings of a disgust for the slack and padded style which must constitute so large a part of everybody's daily reading. The secondary purpose of putting these books on the list, then, is to bring children to early acquaintance with works which have survived the lapse of more than two thousand years, and the more dangerous process of translation, to be to-day the books which stir the attention and the imagination of more kinds of people who speak English than any other book in the language. Here is writing from another age of the world and from another side of the world which holds an unequalled power over the imaginations of our race. It is well that the children who are studying English literature should grow up to know such a book.

When it is used in a school, however, we face immediately the question, how can it be most profitably used? How can boys be brought to look on this book with the affection that springs from delight in reading it? How can they be brought to know it thoroughly without any dulling of the natural pleasure that it is the right of every child to have in stories of such serene clearness

of outline and such simple and vivid action. The first answer to these questions springs, I think, from the main purpose for which I believe the book was put on the list : let the child become as familiar as possible with the stories themselves. In their simplicity and their strength of rhythm will be found the best possible material for training in reading aloud. For this purpose, the younger the children are the better. If the teacher be so fortunately endowed as to read impressively,—and he can judge his capacity by watching the children while he reads these stories,—let him read a chapter or two a day to them, perhaps as a reward for good work done. Then let them try to read also, quietly, with due but sober stress, and with something of the strong, even flow which is demanded by the rhythm. There can be no better exercise to cultivate their ears and their sense of the part played in the expressiveness of fine prose by the quiet, rich music of the sound. If a teacher can make his class like to read these stories aloud he has justified for his school their presence on the list. And at the same time they will become familiar with them in the most natural way.

Such reading needs reinforcement, however ; and the question is, how can this reinforcement be accomplished without killing the child's liking for the stories, and so thwarting the main purpose of setting him to read them. Here a college teacher must speak cautiously in the presence of the teachers who do the work. One way which seems promising, however, is to set the children to collecting allusions from their other reading, and then letting them stump each other with them if they can. In such a game the teacher can easily help, and even take his share. The object of it is to make the children see for themselves how deeply the Old Testament has woven itself into the substance of English literature.

Besides this, it will probably be worth while, perhaps necessary, to have the children repeat the stories in their own words. Here the teacher must be prepared to have his teeth set on edge ; but his sufferings will be relieved by his sense of humor. In some schools it may be possible to use this exercise to help the children to the finer feeling for the value of words and the congruity of language. Almost any child ought to feel the jar if these stories are put into cheap slang ; and perhaps one child in a hundred may be able to articulate his sense of the discord. Imitation of biblical language is dangerous ; there is no more inexpensive way of producing a certain mildly humorous effect than to put some trivial subject into the stately motion of this Old Testament style. It would be better to let the child try to reproduce the stories themselves, and not put the less heroic events of our modern life into a style which will heighten its insignificance. Then, when he compares his product with the original, perhaps he can be made to see the solidity and terseness of the Bible, the absence of colorless and trite general words, the predominance of strong monosyllables, and of words that name either things or actions, and above all, the spar-

ing touches of detail by which these stories are clothed with life and motion. Here again the test of reading aloud will betray the weakness and ineptitude of a paraphrase.

Besides the stories, however, it is to be hoped that in most schools it will be possible to make some excursions, at any rate, into the poetry of the Old Testament. No one who does not know something of the *Psalms* and *Job* and *Proverbs* should be allowed to think that he knows the Old Testament. Here again is admirable material for reading aloud, and still better for committing to memory. A few psalms and a few passages from *Job*, known thoroughly and recited reverently and expressively, ought to set up in any boy's mind a standard of beauty and elevation of feeling. A discussion in class, even though carried on by the few boys who have a literary sense, on the differences between this poetry and modern or classical poetry, might help a whole class to something more than a blind preference for the higher levels of literature.

How far such studies in the narrative and poetry should be backed up by illustration and comment is a question; there is danger here of getting into the field of the Sunday school. A little talk by the teacher on the ways of the unchanging East, with illustrations or illustrative reading, might help boys to realize more vividly the setting of these stories; but there can easily be too much of this. After all, the flowing, sonorous incongruities of *Daniel* stir the imagination and ring in the memory quite as strongly as the stories of David and the intrigues of his children, which the more advanced biblical scholars agree to be authentic records of fact, probably written down very soon after the events. Too much study of background may easily lead off into archaeology; and archaeology, as certain teachers of the classics are demonstrating, is not literature.

Finally, one may set up a few danger posts. The discreet teacher will not need the warning that he must make it impossible for questions of religion to break out. Here the teacher will often need not only tact but foresight. What is not so obvious, perhaps, is that in the schools the Higher Criticism has no place. These stories must be so read and studied as to raise no question of historical value or date; they have no place in the schools except for their high literary qualities. The historical study of the books of the Old Testament is a fascinating pursuit; but it demands time and a maturity of thought which cannot be had in the schools. The more nearly the Old Testament can be read in the schools in the way it was read by our grandfathers and grandmothers the better. Modern critical methods here are an impertinence; and experiments with them would inevitably drive the Bible out of the schools again. The last warning I would give is against the kind of loose talk which declares that the Bible contains models for all kinds of writing. This is simply a misstatement of fact. There is no example in the Old Testament of ex-

position or of argument in our modern understanding of the words; the description is of an entirely different class from that practised by writers to-day; and the narrative is narrowly limited in its range. As a model for use in English composition the Old Testament is almost valueless. It is the fruit of ways of thought and of a life separated from ours by a great abyss, and of conditions that we cannot reproduce. To use it as a model or as a means of teaching schoolboys how to write would be somewhat more preposterous than to use Shakspeare for the same purpose. The most that we can expect is that acquaintance with it will tend to create greater dignity and directness of writing. The Old Testament is supreme as literature; it would be absurd as a textbook of English composition.

One word as to the text to be used. That of the King James translation stands before all others, and should be used unless there are insuperable objections. That alone of all the translations has established itself as English literature. Most modern translations which are not based on the King James translation are distressingly dull and uninspired; the chief virtue of the Revised Version for our present purpose, which it will be remembered is very narrow, is that it follows the King James version as closely as possible.

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The Secretary takes advantage of this space to quote these familiar but ever suggestive passages from Ruskin's *Praeterita*, Book I, chapter 1:

"Walter Scott and Pope's Homer were reading of my own election, but my mother forced me, by steady daily toil, to learn long chapters of the Bible by heart; as well as to read it every syllable through, aloud, hard names and all, from Genesis to the apocalypse, about once a year; and to that discipline — patient, accurate, and resolute — I owe, not only a knowledge of the book, which I find occasionally serviceable, but much of my general power of taking pains, and the best part of my taste in literature. From Walter Scott's novels I might easily, as I grew older, have fallen to other people's novels; and Pope might, perhaps, have led me to take Johnson's English, or Gibbon's, as types of language; but once knowing the 32d of Deuteronomy, the 119th Psalm, the 15th of 1st Corinthians, the Sermon on the Mount, and most of the apocalypse, every syllable by heart, and having always a way of thinking with myself what words meant, it was not possible for me, even in the foolishlest times of youth to write entirely superficial or formal English. . . My mother's list of chapters with which, thus learned, she established my soul in life: Exodus, chapters 15 and 20; 2 Sam., 1, from 17th verse to the end; 1 Kings, 8; Psalms, 23, 32, 90, 91, 103, 112, 119, 139; Prov., 2, 3, 8, 12; Isaiah, 58; Matt., 5, 6, 7; Acts, 26; 1 Cor., 13, 15; James, 4; Revelation, 5, 6. And truly, though I have picked up the elements of a little further knowledge — in mathematics, meteorology, and the like, in after life — and owe not a little to the teaching of many people, this maternal installation of my mind in that property of chapters, I count very confidently the most precious, and, on the whole, the one *essential* part of all my education."